# Reading Autism

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**Michael Fitzgerald, *Autism and Creativity: Is There A Link Between Autism in Men and Exceptional Ability?* Brunner-Routledge, Hove and New York, 2004. Hard cover ISBN 1-58391-213-4. 294 pp. £29.99.**

**Michael Fitzgerald, *The Genesis of Artistic Creativity: Asperger's Syndrome and the Arts.* Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London and Philadelphia, 2005. Paper ISBN 1-84310-3346. 255 pp. £13.95 / $19.95.**

Despite the titles, these books are effectively studies of autism and *artists*. Michael Fitzgerald (Henry Marsh Professor of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry at Trinity College, Dublin) discusses commonplace notions of 'genius' in terms of the autistic spectrum, presenting case studies of deceased writers, philosophers, musicians and painters (including Spinoza, Mozart, William and Jack Butler Yeats, Lowry, Orwell and Warhol), all of whom, he proposes via reference to biographical accounts, suffered with Asperger's syndrome (ASP) or 'high-functioning autism' (HFA), terms he uses interchangeably. His first book (2004) is an extensively referenced, substantially-argued academic tome; the second (2005), a more reader-friendly but also more ambitious expansion of the premises of the first, applying the same methodologies to 'diagnose' a wider sample of celebrated individuals. It is reflective of the continued debate surrounding diagnosis that, since Lorna Wing (1981) first discussed Hans Asperger's findings (published 1944) in terms of a 'syndrome', several experts have, as Fitzgerald acknowledges, suggested slightly different diagnostic criteria (2005, p.11). He refers primarily to the six criteria outlined by Gillberg (1991), which Fitzgerald summarizes as:

"social impairments"; "narrow interests"; "repetitive routines"; "speech and language problems"; "non-verbal communication problems"; and "motor clumsiness" (2004, p.28). Fitzgerald is, to quote his own phrase "diagnosing the dead" (2005, p.25). However, while he is, in his terms as a psychiatrist, "diagnosing" autism in these iconic biographical subjects, when considered from perspectives of cultural and literary theory, this methodology amounts to *reading* autism: relying on (mostly second-hand) written accounts and foregrounding examples of relevant information. As a psychiatrist, Fitzgerald is in an official position to diagnose HFA/ASP; thus, his arguments carry considerable authority. However, these are conclusions based on secondary verbal evidence, as distinct from consultation, and he acknowledges that diagnosis remains somewhat inconclusive: "we don't have a precise cut-off or blood test to make the diagnosis" (2004, p.35). This essay critically reviews Fitzgerald's books and considers what perspectives and methodologies of interdisciplinary literary study might add to discussions of autism and creativity. In keeping with the scientific spirit of his work, the essay experiments with Fitzgerald's conceptual framework by effectively 'reading autism' in *fictional* characters in two literary texts: Forster's *Howards End* and Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape*. However, like Fitzgerald's book, the essay discusses only 'high-functioning' autism, in which, manifestations of the condition can be slight enough to be, indeed, debatable.

From the outset, it is important to distinguish HFA/ASP from more extreme neurological impairments of 'classic autism'. Severe manifestations of early infantile autism were influentially studied by Leo Kanner (1943); within a year, Asperger, working independently from Kanner, published his own findings, informed by a sample

of children with similar impairments, but (generally) higher IQs. Until the 1980s, Kanner's observations tended to dominate connotations of 'autism'. In the last three decades, however, medical (and media) interest in 'Asperger's syndrome' has grown enormously, expanding definitions of 'the autistic spectrum' to the extent that these might encompass individuals unlikely to have been diagnosed autistic by Kanner. Fitzgerald's interest in 'high-functioning' autism is, thus, predominantly influenced by Asperger's terms. There is, however, a fundamental methodological contrast: Asperger described symptoms in individuals he personally observed; Fitzgerald uses a sample of biographies. Another, somewhat ambiguous, distinction between 'Asperger's syndrome' as discussed by Fitzgerald and Asperger's own case studies is the severity of manifestation. Asperger's work is expanded but diluted by Fitzgerald insofar as he, like the former (of whom, Frith notes), appears "not as fascinated by the more severe clinical manifestations of autism as […] the milder ones" (annotation to Asperger, p.67). Yet though Fitzgerald rejects the term "mild autism" in regard to his subjects (2004, p.226), the manifestations he discusses appear "milder" than those observed by Asperger. In his seminal paper "'Autistic psychopathy' in childhood" (1944), Asperger presented studies of four children, all of whom had been referred to the University Paediatric Clinic in Vienna (where he conducted his research), primarily due to behavioral difficulties in school. Yet *none* of Fitzgerald's subjects are reported here to have been even temporarily excluded from school, nor were they referred to specialists during childhood, despite behavioral and learning difficulties. Cultural context is significant here, and the resulting ambiguity is precisely what enables Fitzgerald to argue that, for example, Kant or Melville suffered with HFA/ASP: the implication is that they were undiagnosed only

because the condition had yet to be identified. Most of Fitzgerald's subjects died before the era of psychoanalysis, which itself preceded by three decades the first nominal recognition of 'autism' in 1911 (by Swiss psychiatrist Eugen Bleuler).

Complying with current mainstream psychiatric perspectives (advanced by Asperger: p.84, 86), Fitzgerald discusses autism as a congenital disorder. This reflects the now authoritative consensus that it is not, as Bruno Bettelheim speculated in a theory subsequently discredited, a reflection of parenting (see Sicile-Kira, p.6-7), but a genetic inevitability (the aetiology of which, as Fitzgerald notes, researchers are still "a long way from elucidating fully", 2005, p.16). Outlining his theory of the relationship between creativity and autism, he disregards psychoanalysis of artistic expression as "grossly reductionistic" (p.13), and dismisses Behaviorist approaches as "absurd environmentalism" (p.19-20). He states: "We do not know how a 'package' of genes expresses itself through a work of artistic genius. Certainly the environment plays a very minor role" (p.16). Yet Fitzgerald's focus is on the autistic traits, and, closely related to these, the "artistic genius" of his subjects, rather than their actual "work"; and while environmental factors may not cause autism, they are essential to Fitzgerald's criteria for defining and identifying 'autistic' behavior, presenting *causes for diagnosis.* In this, the environment actually plays a *major* role in his case studies. Accounts of his subjects' "social behavior" form the first, generally most substantial, sections in Fitzgerald's outlining of "Indicators of Asperger's syndrome".

Fitzgerald's studies imply some undefined paradigm of a 'normal' behavior, against which, the eccentricities he discusses are measured. However, his focus on the genetic aspects of autism, though insightful, is sustained at the cost of any consideration

of what constitutes 'normal' or, to adapt his term, *non*-impaired social behavior. The 'autistic' characteristics he reports in his subjects relate less to inherently deviant traits than the fact that various, quoted observers considered these individuals odd. For example, using Glendinning (1998) as his source, Fitzgerald considers Swift's initial visits to Button's Coffee House in London. "[U]nacquainted with anyone there", he was nicknamed "the mad parson", and would, as one observer described, "walk backward and forward at a good pace for half an hour or an hour, without speaking to any mortal" before eventually leaving "without having said a word to anyone" (Glendinning in Fitzgerald, p.33). Fitzgerald's reading of this as evidence of social impairment is not unreasonable, but the description, if read on more general humanist terms, also suggests the behavior of an individual seeking, and literally, *waiting* for, acceptance in a new social milieu. Fitzgerald quotes the anecdote to conclude his account of Swift's supposed social impairments; however, he does not refer to the information, on the subsequent page in Glendinning's biography, that Swift persisted in his visits, and was "within a few months to be an intimate of the distinguished Button's coffee-house group" (p.78). More pertinently, Glendinning recognizes the social context of Swift's attention-seeking, yet uneasy presence there; the sophisticated observers being initially unaware of his publications (which soon earned him their respect), he was first seen, she speculates, as what he also was: "the awkward provincial outsider" (p.78).

The somewhat under-acknowledged significance of social factors in Fitzgerald's diagnoses of autistic behavior becomes especially important when he discusses what are effectively the lifestyle implications of the writer or artist's role. In summarizing the social impairments of his subjects, Fitzgerald refers predominantly to their self-imposed

isolation, including his surmising that Wittgenstein "felt that nothing was worth doing except producing great philosophical works" (2004, p.89), Melville's tendencies to be "aloof" and "reclusive" (2005, p.52), Kant's "autonomous, self-reliant" character (quoting Kuehn, p.122), and Lowry's need for "personal solitude" (p.223). The most pertinent citation of this, however, is Fitzgerald's quotation of Lubin's note that Van Gogh "stressed the importance of his self-isolating proclivities" and "praised his alienation as a necessary part of his creative life" (2005, p.207). This highlights an obviousness that Fitzgerald overlooks: artists may, like many people, work more effectively without distraction. When considering this correlation of the environmental and the essential for the artist, some of the psychoanalytical terms that Fitzgerald rejects may actually be quite pertinent, for his studies have in fact an important precursor in Jung's essay 'Psychology and Literature' (1930/1950):

> The artist is not a person endowed with free will who seeks his own ends, but one who allows art to realize its purposes through him. […] To perform this difficult office it is sometimes necessary for him to sacrifice happiness and everything that makes life worth living for the ordinary human being.
>
> It is as though each of us were endowed at birth with a certain capital of energy. The strongest force in our make-up will seize and all but monopolize this energy […]. In this way, the creative force can drain the human impulses to such a degree that the personal ego must develop all sorts of bad qualities – ruthlessness, selfishness and vanity […].
>
> [The] creative work arises from the unconscious depths […]. The work in progress becomes the poet's fate and determines his psychic development. It is not Goethe who creates *Faust*, but *Faust* who creates Goethe. And what is *Faust* but a symbol? (p.173-4).

Like Jung, Fitzgerald considers eccentricity and artistic ability as effects of a fundamental cause. Yet while Jung attributes both to the unconscious of the artist as "collective man" (p.173), he also considers how they might have their own causal relationship and "drain

the human impulses" of such an individual. Fitzgerald, however, tends to attribute self-isolation and creativity to HFA/ASP without considering how the former may also be a precondition of the latter. This exemplifies a frustrating limitation of Fitzgerald's studies: his readiness to link the six criteria with HFA, but not *each other*.

Fitzgerald's tendency to discuss each diagnostic criterion autonomously becomes problematic when he cites his subjects' commitment to their work as evidence of "narrow interests" and "repetitive routines". Used under both headings, examples of their working habits provide such ample material that, as the books progress, his hypothesis of a link between HFA and artistic ability becomes increasingly convincing, but this is partly the effect of repetition. Fitzgerald makes no direct comparisons with Asperger's own case studies, but cross-references his subjects with each other. Given his acknowledgement of the lack of a "precise cut-off" point for diagnosis, however, there is a hollowness to phrases such as "W. B. Yeats, Ludwig Wittgenstein and George Orwell, all of whom had Asperger's syndrome…" (2005, p.15). Such cross-referencing distorts the arguments because Fitzgerald has selected a sample consisting predominantly (2004) and exclusively (2005) of highly successful (and productive) writers and artists. They appear preoccupied by their work, but he discusses their "obsessions" when he is effectively referring to their *professions*. Most of these individuals earned their livelihoods through their "narrow interests": as indeed did many of Asperger's subjects (p.87-9). However, Asperger also noted that "In many cases the social problems are so profound that they overshadow everything else" (p.37). Of none of Fitzgerald's subjects does this appear to have been true to the same degree; as summarized in each case, it is their *work* that

overshadows everything else, and it is their commitment to this that he discusses as a social problem.

Both books are, as Fitzgerald states, "celebration[s] of persons with artistic genius and Asperger's syndrome" (2005, p.241), and at no point are their achievements trivialized; rather, his studies demonstrate the social *effects* (ahead of the congenital causes) of the pursuit of inspiration. In this, his subjects suggest Adorno's observations in the essay 'Free Time' (1977). Considering the dialectics of work and leisure, the Marxist philosopher sardonically writes:

> Organized freedom is compulsory. Woe betide you if you have no hobby, no pastime; then you are a swot or an old-timer, an eccentric, and you will fall prey to ridicule in a society which foists upon you what your free time should be. (p.190).

Fitzgerald shows his subjects rejecting leisure in favor of work, and indeed, being viewed as 'swots' and 'eccentrics' because of it.

If it is, however, possible to consider these case studies without referring to the subjects' achievements, how convincing is Fitzgerald's application of the other criteria? In places, it is tenuous; partly, again, due to his dismissal of environmental factors, and in the second book, his under-edited, lecture note-like prose. He quotes the following, clearly proud, description of Jack Butler Yeats, from the painter's father:

> My son's affection for Sligo comes out in one small detail. He is ever careful to preserve a certain roll and lurch in his gait, that being the mark of the Sligo man. (see 2005, p.217).

Fitzgerald immediately challenges, with astonishing simplicity, that "This is probably more likely to be an autistic type of gait" (p.217), overlooking the suggestion here of a

sense of *belonging* that would contradict, by definition, notions of 'autism' as derived from the Greek *autos* (self). However, despite the conspicuousness of such assumptions, Professor Fitzgerald's authority as a psychiatrist, and furthermore, the National Autistic Society's support of this book make its arguments difficult to dismiss. Dr. Judith Gould, director of the Society's diagnostic unit, commented: "[Fitzgerald's] theory makes sense, because one of the diagnostic criteria for Asperger's is 'patchy' ability, where some skills are better than others" (see Iggulden).

Fitzgerald's cases studies make depressing reading; not because of any judgment on HFA itself, but because Fitzgerald presents each case to foreground the autistic characteristics at the expense of the 'neurotypical' (neurologically 'normal'), suggesting that the condition defined every aspect of these individuals' lives. In viewing them, implicitly, from a perspective more aligned to the social conventions they eschewed, these books consist largely of descriptions of individuals being misunderstood and often ridiculed by their peers in a manner comparable with that identified by Adorno. However, Fitzgerald's basic aim is nonetheless admirable: to promote wider social understanding of HFA. Asperger briefly mentioned distinguished artistic abilities in some subjects (p.72, 89), but gave far greater prominence to their aptitude for mathematics, this being part of his testing criteria (p.44-5, 55-6). Fitzgerald proposes, justifiably, that these books will challenge the stereotype that equates Asperger's syndrome "with engineering and mathematics" (2005, p.241).

A startling effect of both books is that almost each case study suggests characteristics noted incidentally in virtually *any* biography of a creative individual. Of particular relevance here is Davenport-Hines' *Auden* (1995). Although the poet is

unmentioned by Fitzgerald, Auden spoke of having lived his childhood in "a dream country", commenting in 1970:

> It is no doubt psychologically significant that my sacred world was autistic – that is to say, I had no wish to share it with others nor could I have done so. (see Davenport-Hines, p.19).

Auden's biographer discusses this and the poet's numerous other, similar comments over three pages, noting that Dr. G. A. Auden, his father, was an early researcher in autistic phenomena, and that Auden himself had an interest in the subject. However, Davenport-Hines, after acknowledging the "different meaning now" of the term (he was writing in the 1990s), decides: "It would be reckless to claim that Auden was an autistic child: it is enough to report that as an adult he considered his imaginary childhood world to have been autistic and that […] he referred on several occasions to autism." (p.21). He thus appears to remain open-minded on this, but provides nonetheless a four-hundred page biography in which, at no point, Auden's statements regarding his own autistic traits are allowed to define the chronicling of his life.

Although Fitzgerald's focus in these books is restricted to renowned artists, his application of the diagnostic criteria utilizes many incidental human characteristics, such as meticulousness, punctuality and the keeping of notebooks. How commonplace, then, are instances of 'autistic' behavior in the culture around us, and how readily can they be identified? One way of exploring this is to apply Fitzgerald's approach to fictitious characters. Two adjacent books were randomly pulled off a shelf: Forster's novel *Howards End* (1910) and Beckett's *Complete Dramatic Works*. While the latter contains a fortuitously substantial example of an individual displaying autistic traits in the

eponymous, single character in *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958), the first example, Mrs Wilcox in *Howards End*, is a less obvious candidate, primarily because she is a woman. Asperger's syndrome is greatly more prevalent in males than females, though it is noteworthy that Asperger's own sample (1944) consisted of four boys. Similarly, Fitzgerald's twenty-six case studies include only one woman, Simone Weil (2005). This section of the essay, however, does not attempt to speculate on the *prevalence* of HFA, nor indeed to 'diagnose' these characters, but to simply consider, applying the criteria as used by Fitzgerald, how immediately its manifestation might be identified in subjects on a purely *textual* basis, this being the methodological limit of his use of biographies. Fitzgerald dismisses the Barthesian premise of 'the death of the Author' as used by literary critics as "clearly absurd" (2004, p.16), yet, in the basest manner, the death of the author is a prerequisite of each of his case studies. Although Fitzgerald undertakes a brief diagnostic analysis of Conan Doyle's creation of Sherlock Holmes as a reflection of the author's own supposed HFA/ASP (2005, p.84-6), the following discussion will not speculate the ontological perspectives of Forster and Beckett, since this would distract from the central purpose of reading autism on the basis of *single* texts, treated thus as definitive representations of the characters discussed: in this, the value of literary texts as means of such analysis is compared with that of biographies, as utilized by Fitzgerald.

In *Howards End*, Mrs Wilcox's presence is limited, yet she displays, to varying degrees, all six of Gillberg's criteria. Of these, motor clumsiness is the least apparent, though in her formative, first appearances in the novel, physical idiosyncrasies are suggested in her tendency to "trail" rather than walk, and bring her long dress over the "sopping" meadow, as if indifferent to the sensation and (while a guest, Helen, is staying

at her home) eccentricity of this (Forster, p.20). The other five criteria interrelate more complexly in limiting her communication with others. Most obvious is Mrs Wilcox's preoccupation with her interests: nature, and, synonymous with this, her house, Howards End. These are linked to the further criteria of odd, repetitive routines, for example, trailing the meadow "with her hands full of the hay", which she repeatedly sniffs (p.20, 36). It is only when Mrs Wilcox is at home at Howards End that she is able to enjoy her interests and the routines associated with them, and only there does she appear content. When Margaret uninvitedly calls on her in London, Mrs Wilcox is tired, slightly irritable, and in bed. When Margaret comments "I thought of you as one of the early risers", she replies "At Howards End – yes; there is nothing to get up for in London" (p.80).

Manifestations of speech and language problems might also be considered in the context of narrow interests, and, furthermore, as social impairments (though Fitzgerald does not pursue this link). An advantage of reading autistic traits in fictitious characters, rather than deceased artists (especially those who worked in non-verbal modes) is the presentation of their conversation. An epistemological problem with the latter approach is exemplified in Fitzgerald's claim that "The language that Satie used provides evidence of autism" (2005, p.176), qualified not by its quotation, but reference to a summary of it in Volta's 1996 commentary for *The Collected Writings of Erik Satie*. Literary texts provide fixed, yet contextually varied, evidence of a character's speech. In this, might they form more reliable examples of this important dimension of HFA?

It is in the manner and content of her speech that Mrs Wilcox's mysterious, and in *Howards End*, singular perspective on the world, is most discernible. Her first reported words are "Charles, dear […] Charles, dear Charles, one doesn't ask plain questions.

There aren't such things" (p.36). Thus, Mrs Wilcox silences an argument between her sons with an aphorism on the limitations of language that might have momentarily silenced even Wittgenstein, who, Fitzgerald states eleven times in the second book (referring to the first) "also had Asperger's Syndrome". Mrs Wilcox's own speech, however, is itself plain, occasionally astounding her family (see p.37). Her enigmatic statements cause even Margaret, the most sympathetic other character, to be "startled and a little annoyed" when, after some thought, Mrs Wilcox comments: "I almost think you forget you're a girl" (p.83). Challenged about this, she states "I cannot put things clearly"; and, earlier in the same scene, having refused, despite Margaret's prompts, to reassure her that the hostility between the Wilcoxes and the Schlegels has been resolved, she comments "I always sound uncertain over things. It is my way of speaking." (p.79-80). Her voice itself is also described in terms that might now suggest the "unusual voice characteristics" of ASP (Fitzgerald, 2004, p.174): "sweet and compelling", but with "even, unemotional tones" and "little range of expression" (Forster, p.80). More intriguing, however, is the subsequent specification that: "Only once had it quickened – when she was speaking of Howards End" (p.81). Mrs Wilcox's narrow interests might also relate, then, to her "speech problems" and the further criterion of "non-verbal communication problems". She hopes that the story of the wych-elm "might interest" her visitor, but Margaret's responses appear both skeptical and *un*-interested; yet, her hostess does not acknowledge this (p.82). When she then gives "too minute an account" of her family's activities, Mrs Wilcox shows no recognition that "Margaret could not bear being bored", despite her guest's absent-minded fiddling with a photograph frame (p.82).

Another cultural theory text that forms an insightful counterpart to Fitzgerald's effectively essentialist study of social eccentricities in high-achieving individuals is Hoggart's chapter 'The Uprooted and the Anxious' in *The Uses of Literacy* (1957, pp.291-317). Indicating the influence of *Howards End* (through the character of Leonard Bast), Hoggart outlines the socially isolating effects of autodidacticism: another pursuit that Fitzgerald associates with HFA/ASP (2004, p.84, 175). Hoggart considers how scholarship can leave working-class individuals alienated from both their origins and the more middle-class company in which they find themselves, and he reads the effects of this as manifest in various social situations. For Mrs Wilcox, however, the change was not the result of education, but marriage. She does not appear to be a woman of working-class origin, but has, nonetheless, married into 'higher' social echelons (Forster, p.36), and appears confused by formal occasions in which her husband is not also present. This is poignantly illustrated in her discomfort at the luncheon party, held by Margaret in her honor. She does not "blend" with the educated, socialite others; "the atmosphere [is] one of polite bewilderment" (p.84). The rigidly intellectual conversation alienates Mrs Wilcox, whom "Clever talk alarmed […] and withered her delicate imaginings" (p.84). She momentarily becomes animated at Margaret's description of the view of the River Oder (p.85), but when another guest disagrees with Margaret's opinions on Böcklin's landscapes and asks Mrs Wilcox for hers, she appears to interpret this as a personal criticism of her friend, causing "a chill" to fall on the conversation (p.86). Most significant, however, is Forster's overt summary of her personality, and how its expression varied according to environmental context:

> She and daily life were out of focus: one or the other must show blurred. And at lunch she seemed more out of focus than usual, nearer the line that divides daily life from a life that may be of greater importance. (p.86-7).

A further suggestion that Mrs Wilcox's 'autistic' characteristics are aggravated by varying social situations is apparent in her dislike of, and distractibility when, shopping: "The din is so confusing" (p.90).

Fitzgerald concludes each case study by assessing how each individual complies with the diagnostic criteria. Mrs Wilcox, on such terms, complies with all six. Can she, then, justifiably be considered to 'have' HFA/ASP? Before considering this question further, let us discuss a second character, Krapp: a fictitious person who displays more obviously the characteristics as discussed by Fitzgerald. This is partially a consequence of Krapp's representation in a different genre. As a character created for the stage, he displays more clearly than Mrs Wilcox what are perhaps the most socially visible signs of the condition: the physical. This provides a further instance of how literature, particularly drama, can serve more usefully than biography to provide examples or 'evidence' of a subject's demeanor and behavior. Fitzgerald refers, with varying degrees of certainty, to the motor clumsiness of his subjects, but in analyzing individuals who died before the widespread availability of the motion-camera, he has no alternative to reliance on significant, but vague, second-hand descriptions of, for example, Melville's tendencies to be "incorrigibly clumsy" and "unhandy with tools" (Robertson-Lorant in Fitzgerald, p. 54), or Weil's "clumsy way of holding chalk" (Gray in Fitzgerald, 2005, p.133).

In Beckett's short play, Krapp twice displays motor clumsiness; he slips on the banana skin he dropped moments earlier (Beckett, p.216), then knocks a box off the table (p.217). He manifests further physical traits of ASP discussed by Fitzgerald in his

unusual dress, including “trousers too short for him”, “grimy white shirt open at neck” and a “Surprising pair of dirty white boots, size ten at least, very narrow and pointed” (p.215). Not unlike Mrs Wilcox’s indifference to her “sopping” dress, Krapp’s seemingly unchanging attire suggests Fitzgerald’s notes of various idiosyncrasies of dress in his subjects, relating these to both preservation of routine (2004, p.88, 187) and “problems with touch” (2005, p.132).

Like Mrs Wilcox, Krapp might suggest ASP in his “distinctive intonation” (Beckett, p.215). Fitzgerald frequently cites reported “unusual voice characteristics typical of Asperger’s syndrome” in his subjects, ranging from William Butler Yeats’s “beautiful speaking voice” (2004, p.174) to Orwell’s “flat dead voice” (Meyers in Fitzgerald, 2005, p.91). (Whether unusual voice characteristics are believed to be related to motor clumsiness is unclear in Fitzgerald’s accounts). Krapp is also fascinated by words, becoming newly intrigued by the sound and meaning of the ‘viduity’ (p.219), and commenting on the last tape: “Revelled in the word spool. [*With relish.*] Spooool!” (p.222).

Krapp’s actions in the play revolve around repetitive routines, central to which are his tapes of his own monologues. Like Mrs Wilcox’s, his repetitive routines are linked to his narrow interests: primarily, himself and his life. Like most of Fitzgerald’s subjects, Krapp is a published writer, and his tapes are further poetic creations. Repetition also marks Krapp’s diet, seemingly consisting only of bananas. Though not integral to the six criteria, unusual eating habits, as Fitzgerald notes when discussing Wittgenstein (2004, p.87), are prevalent amongst individuals with ASP.

The most ambiguous, and most intriguing suggestions of Krapp's autism are his social impairments and non-verbal communication. One tape, describing his regular visits to the weir, reveals his encounter with a "dark young beauty" pushing a perambulator:

> Whenever I looked in her direction she had her eyes on me. And yet when I was bold enough to speak to her – not having been introduced – she threatened to call a policeman. (p.219-220).

The specifications of Krapp's odd demeanor (he is introduced "staring vacuously before him" and repeatedly "peering": p.216) suggest that he may have intimidated the woman, or attracted her attention, by his very eccentricity. The incident suggests Krapp's non-verbal communication problems insofar as he does not appear to consider these possibilities; he also ignores (despite his own adjective) the "funereal" perambulator as a signifier that she may be otherwise attached. Yet, when reading Krapp's autistic traits, an important twist in the text is his conclusive comment on the incident: "As if I had designs on her virtue! [*Laugh. Pause.*]" (p.220). The extent to which this is said either sarcastically or guiltily is the director's choice: the 'laugh' perhaps suggesting the former, the 'pause' the latter. In suggesting sarcasm, Krapp deviates from the stereotype of autistic individuals tending to speak on a most literal level (as Mrs Wilcox tends to do). More pertinently, Krapp's ambiguous exclamation leads to a question suggested repeatedly by Fitzgerald's case studies, but never addressed: were Swift, Wittgenstein and Yeats (or Mrs Wilcox and Krapp) oblivious to social convention, or indifferent to it?

The two fictional characters illustrate a less frequently discussed aspect of autism in their responses to nature; a subject repeatedly, but inconsistently, mentioned by Fitzgerald. He summarizes that Ayers "had an autistic relationship to nature, which made

little sense to him" (2005, p.139), but, conversely, quotes Masefield's recollection of William Butler Yeats being "deeply moved by the beauty and mystery of the Sligo coast" (2004, p.190), and notes Beethoven's "almost religious" love of natural landscape, in which, he compares him with Wittgenstein (2005, p.162). Furthermore, discussing Van Gogh's paintings, Fitzgerald writes that "Persons with Asperger's syndrome are fascinated by landscape and colour" (p.206). Mrs Wilcox shows comparable engagement with nature in her intense attachment to the garden and meadows, and her belief in the wych-elm's healing effects, while Krapp's most poetic recollections (in his "distinctive intonation") pertain to his revelatory "vision" before the "great granite rocks the foam flying up in the light of the lighthouse" (p.220). Yet, the discordance between Fitzgerald's numerous citations of intense responses to landscape and his summary of Ayers' "autistic" indifference to nature is important, and his recognition of the contradiction would have been valuable, for it suggests that, despite certain shared idiosyncrasies, the personalities of individuals with HFA/ASP may vary much like those of 'neurotypicals'.

A further trait to which Fitzgerald devotes much attention is "naivety and childishness", a subheading in several case studies. Mrs Wilcox exudes this in her "wonderful innocence" (p.99), and Krapp in his almost mystical fascinations with time, nature and words. Again, it might have been insightful had Fitzgerald discussed "naivety" in relation to other characteristics, especially the responses to nature, for these two traits have long been linked in literary philosophy. In 1836, Emerson wrote:

> To speak truly, few adults see nature. Most persons do not see the sun […]. The sun illuminates only the eye of the man, but shines into the eye and the heart of the child. The lover of nature is he whose inward and

> outward senses are still truly adjusted to each other; who has retained the spirit of infancy even into the era of manhood. (p.995).

Considering Fitzgerald's discussion of the Wittgenstein's general ability to "relate exceptionally well to children" (2004, p.80), Yeats's "juvenile" humor (p.174), Beethoven's "emotional immaturity" (which "tends to go with creativity": 2005, p.164), and the reverence for nature shared by all three, Emerson's speculation might yield further insight, and in terms and language more sympathetic to artists.

So can Mrs Wilcox and Krapp, then, be considered to 'have' Asperger's syndrome? As fictitious characters, created before the terms came into medical (let alone media) usage, such a conclusion remains anachronistic and irresolutely speculative. Nonetheless, using Fitzgerald's approach of selective close reading, they can be shown to display the diagnostic criteria. Furthermore, as characters whose essences are confined to single texts, the evidence in which their supposedly autistic traits are manifest is fixed in a way that cannot be rivaled in biographies consisting of multitudinous, subjective accounts by a range of commentators with different perspectives and agendas. However, the approach used in this essay to enable reading *of* autism can itself be summarized as autistic reading: predetermined by narrow interest in just one way of discussing characters, collecting consistent examples in a routine-like, formulaic manner to sustain a central theory. Furthermore, emphasizing the literal, it carries "speech and language problems", focusing on concrete, quotable statements at the expense of subtler, but, in the fuller contexts of these works, more sustained aesthetic effects and thematic concerns. Nonetheless, these criticisms also pertain to many other theoretical approaches to textual analysis.

Mrs Wilcox especially is an invaluable literary creation in whom to read autism, for she complies with the definition Forster later proposed of the "round character"; she is "capable of surprising in a convincing way" (1927, p.81) as she calms, charms and mystifies the other characters. Forster identified "flat" characters as "constructed around a single idea or quality; when there is more than one factor in them, we get the beginning of a curve towards the round" (Ibid.). Even if, to suggest a bolder interpretation, Forster's portrait of Mrs Wilcox *was* informed by "a single idea" of autism as apparent (prior to the condition's recognition by psychologists) in some individuals, it is presented, in this character's roundness, as a *quality*, and her repetitive routines might further be related to her "unvarying virtue" (Forster, 1910, p.99).

In his two challenging and ambitious new books, Fitzgerald's achievement is perhaps in changing not our perceptions of these iconic biographical subjects, but our perceptions of autism. Diagnoses of HFA/ASP are rapidly increasing; Fitzgerald asserts that "The individuals discussed in [these books] are the kind of people who have been missed in the past" (2004, p.36). It is important to remember, however, that his subjects all led productive, thus, on their terms, relatively fulfilling lives *without* diagnosis. Had these people been labeled, would the seeds of their genius have flourished as they did?

After summarizing William Butler Yeats' genetic heritage, delayed language development, difficulties in relationships, consuming interests, absent-mindedness, possible depression and mild motor clumsiness, Fitzgerald concludes that he "meets the criteria for HFA/ASP", and proposes: "It is necessary now for literary critics to examine the effect of Yeats' psychopathology on his poetry and other writings" (2004, p.193). What, then, of the studies of Yeats that do (and will) *not* discuss his supposed 'autism'?

Perhaps these become still more valuable, for in considering Yeats within a range of other biographical, cultural and theoretical terms, they implicitly testify, like Glendinning's biography of Swift and Davenport-Hines' of Auden, that discernible manifestations of autism, even if genetically inherent, might not define every moment in an individual's life and mind. Similarly, Emerson's reflections, like *Howards End* and *Krapp's Last Tape*, provide intriguing instances of how literary philosophy, freer from ideals of certainty, might advance valuable observations of human traits, and even conditions, centuries ahead of science.

In *Howards End*, Forster writes: "Only connect the prose and the passion, and both will be exalted" (p.188). Fitzgerald's books, despite the rigid conclusions that may frustrate readers approaching them on terms associated more with 'the arts', might yet prove significant early texts in a scientific field that schools of cultural and literary theory could ill-afford to ignore; equally, perhaps science can, likewise, ill-afford to ignore them.

## Note

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